Pardon Board expanding its role in prison system

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Although the state Pardon Board has reviewed the cases of 417 felons in the last 15 months, the panel is doing more than looking at individual requests for clemency and pardons from the governor.

Besides reviewing such requests, the Pardon Board has stepped back to look at overall prison conditions and is working on several broad fronts to use its power to recommend pardons as a tool for changing corrections practices.

For example, two Louisiana State Penitentiary inmates with extreme medical problems were among the beneficiaries of Gov. Buddy Roemer's latest round of clemency actions.

The clemency actions are the result of a project undertaken by the Roemer-appointed Pardon Board involving the review of all medical cases where the prison medical staff determines an inmate may be a candidate for nursing home or family care.

"The medical costs were eating away at the (prison) budget," Pardon Board Chairman Yvonne Campbell said. "It was becoming impossible to care for these people. And as they no longer pose a threat to society, then they should be released to some family member or to a nursing home."

The average cost of keeping an inmate at Angola is $27 a day, and medical cases add major expenses on top of that — particularly cases that require 24-hour care.

As a result, the board reviewed 28 medical cases. Hearings were denied in 14 cases. Hearings have been held in all but two of the other cases, and the board has recommended freedom or parole eligibility in five cases.

One inmate died before his hearing date and another inmate's case is yet to be heard.

Roemer has accepted the board's recommendation in two cases and...
rejected two others. The fifth recommendation — made last week — is on its way to the governor’s office for action.

The two receiving clemency were serving life terms on second-degree murder convictions.

Roemer’s action meant parole eligibility for Charles Connor, 63, sentenced in 1961 for a Scotlandville barroom murder. Connor has throat cancer.

Roemer’s action also meant freedom for Herman Davis, 68, sentenced in 1975 in an Orleans Parish murder case. Davis needs full medical assistance and will become eligible federal health care benefits upon release.

“These individuals need additional assistance and care and no longer represent a threat to society,” Roemer said as he announced his actions.

Roemer said he wants his board to continue to consider cases of inmates who are seriously ill and those who are elderly.

The medical review project worked out so well, Campbell said, the board is thinking about launching another project involving the cases of “long-termers” — inmates who have served long stretches, sometimes decades, behind bars.

“Some of them have given up any hope and may not file an application,” Campbell said.

Discussions of the project are in the preliminary stages.

Roemer’s Pardon Board, which took over in April 1988, had held hearings on 417 cases as of last week. Of those cases, the board sent 161 clemency recommendations to the governor, including 91 recommendations for restoration of citizenship rights for offenders who have completed prison terms.

On top of those it sent along some cases left over from the administrations of Govs. Edwin Edwards and David Treen.

Roemer has approved 33 clemency recommendations, according to Pardon Board records. He has reject clemency in 64 cases — 45 from his board and another 19 left over from Edwards but sent along by his board.

“We hear all types of cases and our recommendations have been for a myriad of crimes but recommendations are based upon what we see and feel is just and fair based on institutional record, seriousness of the crime, the victim’s input, the family — any support network that this person may have when he gets out,” Campbell said.

“We try to hear each case and let each case speak on its own merits to us,” she said.

Campbell said the board - through its actions in cases - has gone on record opposing life sentences in drug cases involving heroin.

“We have recommended some time cuts based on prison records, future plans because in our opinion heroin is no more or less dangerous than cocaine or crack” neither of which carry the possibility of life in prison, Campbell said.

“Something should be done to change that law.”

Campbell said the Pardon Board deals with many cases of individuals who have finished prison terms and want such citizenship rights restored as voting and the ability to have a firearm.

Many jobs require the individual to hold a professional license and those licenses cannot be attained without a pardon, she said. The board has run into cases where a drug offender is now working at a rehabilitation center and needs a pardon to get the necessary counseling certificate.

“There are a lot of people who are out and can’t get better jobs because of felony convictions,” Campbell said. “If a person has remained arrest-free, maintained employment, been stable, I see no reason why they should not be given their rights back.”

For the most part, Campbell said the board’s cases are not of the sensational variety, and the board generally recommends reductions in sentences rather than commutation to time served.

If approved by the governor, sentence reductions can make an individual eligible for parole. The individual then has to get parole board approval before getting out of prison.

If the inmate gets out on parole, he is under supervision and one slip-up can put him back in jail.